

Falling tide
Harvard International Review
Cambridge
Winter 1997/1998

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Volume: 20

Issue: 1

Pagination: 60-64

ISSN: 07391854

Subject Terms: Activism
Trends
Social change

Classification Codes: 9190: US
1200: Social policy

Geographic Names: US
Abstract:

While the case for decline in American associational life has not been proven, there are a number of trends that indicate a lower stock of social capital among at least parts of American society. International comparisons of civil society reveal interesting and often paradoxical trends, but suggest that perhaps the US is not alone in facing a problem in the values and associations on which healthy democratic government depends. The US presents a rather confusing picture. Empirical data does not clearly suggest that civil society is in decline, but there is a strong popular perception that it is, evidenced, among other things, by the responsive chord struck by

Robert Putnam's now familiar 1995 article "Bowling Alone." Expressions of cynicism and distrust have dramatically displaced respect for authority in American popular culture, suggesting some sort of erosion of civil society. It is clear that many of the phenomena suggested by the Putnam debate characterize other industrialized societies as well.

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Global Trends and US Civil Society

Modern liberal states require healthy civil societies for their long-run stability-under a system of limited government, society must be self-organizing to fulfill a variety of social needs. Furthermore, the democratic process requires citizens to organize if they are to represent their passions and interests effectively in the political marketplace. Civil society presupposes social capital-the norms and values that permit cooperative behavior on the part of groups. The assertions that American civil society is ailing and that American social capital has been depleted have been put forward in recent years, most notably by Robert Putnam. While the case for decline in American associational life has not been proven, there are number of trends that indicate a lower stock of social capital among at least parts of American society. International comparisons of civil society reveal interesting and often paradoxical trends, but suggest that perhaps the United States is not alone in facing a problems in the values and associations on which healthy democratic government depends.

Individualism and hostility to authority are deeply ingrained themes in American political culture. Nevertheless, Alexis de Tocqueville and many other acute observers of American social life have noted that Americans often unite in voluntary social groups to achieve social and political objectives. This is not the paradox it seems to be-for most Americans, individualism means hostility to ascribed social status, coupled with the belief that individuals should be free to choose their own social attachments.

American individualism has seldom involved hostility to community life altogether. The individualism embedded in the US Declaration of Independence and the US Constitution, as well as in the Lockean tradition of liberalism on which these documents are founded, is counterbalanced by a sectarian Protestant tradition that fosters cooperation in small voluntary organizations. The secular voluntary associationsnon-governmental organizations (NGOs), labor unions, and activist groups-which today comprise American civil society are the heirs of this religious heritage.

The Putnam Debate

Any contemporary discussion of the state of American civil society must begin with the controversy engendered by Robert Putnam's 1995 article "Bowling Alone." In a now familiar argument, Putnam relied on a wide variety of empirical measures of social capital and argued

that America's traditional "art of association" has been in decline since the mid-1960s.

Putnam relies on two sorts of data. The first is survey data concerning numbers and types of organizations to which respondents belong and their attitudes about trust, other people's honesty, and the like. The second type of data concerns the numbers of groups in various regions or countries and their membership trends over time. Together, these statistics are taken as indicators of social capital.

The survey data on trust shows an unambiguous decline between the early 1960s and the early 1990s. The largest declines concern trust in public institutions, such as Congress, the President, and "government" in general. In 1960, 70 percent of Americans polled said that they expected their government to "do the right thing." By 1990, only 19 percent shared that sentiment. Levels of interpersonal trust have exhibited similar, though somewhat less dramatic, trends. In 1965, 58 percent of Americans indicated that they trusted their fellow citizens. By 1991, that majority had dwindled to a 37 percent minority.

Putnam also cites declines in the memberships of organizations such as the Boy Scouts, the Red Cross, parent-teacher associations, and the so called "animal organizations"-traditional service groups such as the Elks, the Kiwanis, and the Lions-that were an important aspect of social life in earlier generations, especially for men. The data on group memberships is ambiguous, however, and subject to what are perhaps insuperable problems of measurement.

Putnam has been criticized on both empirical and normative grounds. Numerous scholars have pointed to a significant number of surveys showing that groups and group membership may have actually increased over the time period covered by Putnam, particularly for younger Americans. Other academics suggest that many important qualitative aspects of civic engagement are not reflected in the available data. It is entirely possible, for example, that people are more actively involved in a smaller number of organizations. One recent study of civic engagement in Philadelphia pointed to the fact that while expressed cynicism is up, time spent by people in community organizations has increased.

[IMAGE PHOTOGRAPH] Captioned as: A healthy democracy requires a vibrant civic society.

Data on declining groups and group memberships may be misleading for other reasons as well. First, newly formed groups tend to be poorly organized and hence less likely to keep good statistical information on themselves or to be included in surveys of group membership. Researchers learned of the membership decline among the Freemasons and Shriners only because those groups are well-established and keep good records. Much less is known, on the other hand, about the many informal support groups that formed in response to the AIDS epidemic over the past decade and a half. In addition, for a large number of informal social networks, no data exists at all. Alcoholics Anonymous, for example, deliberately refuses to keep membership statistics.

In a society with a constant level of group turnover, available data would always tend to show decline because of the lack of data on newer groups.

The Bad Apple Effect

Group membership statistics do not fully measure the effects of associations on civil life. Not all groups contribute positively to society. Some—such as the Ku Klux Klan, organized crime, or the Nation of Islam—breed distrust and hatred or are actively engaged in criminal activity. In addition, groups with more benign purposes can nonetheless be problematic from the standpoint of democratic governance. Mancur Olson has argued that societies—particularly modern welfare states—tend to accumulate rent-seeking interest groups whose primary goal is to win state subsidies for their members, a dynamic that contributes to economic and political stagnation. Several observers have argued that there can be such a thing as "too much civil society." In a highly politicized society where interest groups are actively represented, the political process is often not focused on the national interest and can become mired in socially inefficient, special-interest politicking. The expansion of well-organized, well-funded interest-group lobbying in Washington over the past few decades would hardly have given Tocqueville—or any other proponent of American democracy—cause to celebrate.

To measure the social capital derived from association accurately, one must distinguish between groups that produce negative and positive externalities. While all groups require some degree of social capital to operate, hate groups actively destroy trust and social capital outside of their membership.

On the other hand, some organizations contribute to social capital by building bonds of trust that benefit society at large. As the German sociologist Max Weber noted, America's historical Puritan ethic mandated honesty not simply toward other members of one's religious community, but toward all human beings. Norms of reciprocity, however, can be only shared effectively among a small subset of a group's members. While groups Putnam terms "membership groups," such as the American Association of Retired People (AARP), often have huge memberships, there is no reason to think that any two given members of such a group will trust one another or engage in coordinated action just because they pay annual dues to the same organization. The fact that, of all groups in the United States, the AARP has a membership second in size only to the Catholic Church, should therefore not be weighed heavily in evaluating its contribution to the nation's civil society. The exclusion of such "membership groups" strengthens Putnam's case but does not explain why voluntary activities seem to be increasing in some sectors of American society.

The United States thus presents a rather confusing picture. Empirical data does not clearly suggest that civil society is in decline, but there is a strong popular perception that it is, evidenced, among other things, by the responsive chord struck by Putnam's original article. As anyone who experiences contemporary American society knows, expressions of cynicism and distrust have dramatically displaced respect for authority in American popular culture, suggesting some sort of erosion of civil society.

International Comparisons

How does the United States compare to other societies in terms of the health of its civil society and the prevalence of social values such as trust and willingness to cooperate? One source of very relevant data is the long-running World Values Survey conducted by the University of Michigan. This survey asked respondents in 43 countries a long series of value-related questions in both 1981 and 1991.

The results of the University of Michigan study confirm that the United States remains a trusting place relative to other countries, as the accompanying chart shows, despite the fact that trust may have declined in the United States. The data also confirms a common observation that Latin Catholic countries tend to be more atomized and less trusting than Protestant ones: of the eleven countries with a Christian cultural heritage, the five most trusting are majority Protestant and five of the six least trusting are majority Catholic.

[IMAGE TABLE] Captioned as: Table 1:

The World Values Survey also addressed levels of civic engagement by asking respondents whether they were active members of a variety of organizations, including social welfare, religious, cultural, and political groups, as table 1 shows. International data on organizations and memberships is more or less consistent with what was said above about the Putnam data on the United States: while some types of organizations, including religious groups and trade unions, have seen their membership decline during the 1980s, other groups, such as environmental organizations, have seen increases. Japan alone shows a trend of decreasing group membership across the board, while South Korea shows a striking pattern of increasing membership. But for the most part, developed countries do not exhibit a clear trend toward either declining or increasing group activity.

In addition to the general question about the trustworthiness of others noted above, the survey asked respondents whether they would engage in certain unethical behaviors such as tax fraud, accepting stolen goods, lying, and adultery, as the accompanying table shows. In contrast to the group membership data, this ethical data reveals a much clearer pattern: paradoxically, expressed levels of generalized trust increased in most countries, while the ethical attitudes that presumably produce trust apparently declined. This seems to contradict Putnam's findings. The United States, Britain, Canada, Italy, and Germany all exhibit significant declines in self-reported ethical attitudes. Japan, on the other hand, showed a small increase in the ethical variables, while Spain and particularly South Korea showed extremely large increases. Latin American countries were split: Argentina showed large increases in most ethical variables, while Mexico showed equally dramatic declines.

America seems to have witnessed a substantial decline in expressed levels of trust, while showing ambiguous trends with regard to group membership, a pattern characteristic of other developed countries such as Germany, Italy, Sweden, and Canada. This suggests that Putnam is wrong in claiming that group membership and trust are positively correlated across societies. It

is possible to have stable or increasing group activity and steadily declining levels of trust and ethical behavior. One possible explanation of this apparent paradox is that many of the groups that are increasing in membership are the so-called "membership groups" which produce little by way of social capital.

Other Measures of Social Capital An alternative to counting groups and group memberships exists which may be a more effective metric of the health of American civil society. If it is difficult to measure social capital as a positive quantity for the reasons suggested above, it is perhaps possible to measure the absence of social capital through what sociologists have traditionally labeled "social deviance" statistics-measures of crime, suicide rates, family breakdown and illegitimacy, tax evasion, and the like. Deviance data is subject to its own measurement problems, but it is far more abundant on a comparative basis than data on group memberships.

The problem with using deviance data as a proxy for either social capital or civil society more broadly is that it ignores questions of distribution, a problem shared by the Putnam data as well. Social capital and the propensity to work cooperatively in the groups that constitute civil society are not evenly distributed among different social classes, ethnic groups, or other strata within a given society. This problem is especially significant for a large and diverse society such as the United States. It has long been recognized, for example, that low-income African-American communities tend to be far more atomized and less prone to self-organization than various Asian-American communities. Deviance data runs the risk of measuring the absence of social capital within those sectors of society that tend to be atomized, while revealing little about other parts of the same society. It is perfectly possible that social capital can decline in some sectors while increasing in others, a scenario that is quite likely in the case of the United States.

[IMAGE TABLE] Captioned as: Table 2:

With this caveat in mind, behavioral data confirms the trends evident in the World Values Survey data on ethical values, as table 2 shows. The incidence of social deviance has grown rapidly in virtually all Organization of Economic Cooperation and Development (OECD) countries since approximately the mid-1960s, with the exception of Japan. This may resolve the paradox noted above: stable or ambiguous levels of group memberships exist across different societies but are accompanied by increasing levels of expressed distrust and cynicism in those same countries.

Like the United States, many developed countries have experienced sharply increasing levels of crime and family breakdown. These two types of deviance may not have much of an impact on that part of civil society most relevant to the democratic political process-often the province of national elites-but they are related to the broader social functions of civil society-the socialization and education of children, the maintenance of safe and stable neighborhoods, and the like. In the case of the United States, it would seem that much of the decline in expressed levels of trust noted by Putnam can be tied directly to social trends of crime and family breakdown, and it is at least plausible that a similar process is unfolding in other countries as

well.

A Note on Asian Values

One interesting sidelight of the data presented above is the fact that Asian societies seem to defy the trends detailed above. Japan and South Korea exhibited large increases in self-described levels of ethical behavior in the World Values Survey data between 1981 and 1991, and relatively unchanged levels of social deviance. Findings such as these have prompted many to conclude that perhaps Asian societies are fundamentally different from other OECD societies.

Asian spokesmen, notably former Prime Minister Lee Kuan Yew of Singapore and Mahathir bin Muhammed of Malaysia, have been quick to note the difference in deviance levels between their societies and those of the West. They have argued that by accepting the economic but not the political principles (individualism and democracy) of modernity, countries such as Singapore and Malaysia have achieved high standards of living while avoiding many of the social problems that plague the United States. The empirical data does suggest that there are important differences between Asia and the West in both self-expressed values and actual social behavior.

A more difficult question has to do with the causes of those differences. It is not clear that democracy per se is related to social disorganization: Japan, after all, is an Asian country with low levels of deviance and workable democratic institutions. Western countries, which are all democratic, vary considerably among themselves in levels of deviance. It is quite likely that social indicators such as family breakdown and (more weakly) crime are related to narrower variables such as female labor-force participation. For reasons that cannot be fully elaborated here, the single most important value difference between Asia and the West has to do with the role of women. As demographic pressures in Japan and other industrially mature Asian societies increase the demand for female labor over the next generation, those societies will likely begin to see increases in their deviance indicators.

[IMAGE GRAPH] Captioned as: CAN OTHER PEOPLE BE TRUSTED?

The Global Decline

Academic debate about the state of American civil society has up to now been rather parochial, concentrating on trends in US society alone. It is clear, however, that many of the phenomena suggested by the Putnam debate characterize other industrialized societies as well. In searching for explanations for the shifts in trust levels and social capital, it is critical to avoid excessively insular explanations that relate only to the particular history and experiences of the United States. The Vietnam War, Watergate, IranContra, and other US political developments are not sufficient to give an account of increasing levels of cynicism and distrust in Italy and Australia. While we might be tempted to give country-by-country accounts of why levels of trust and ethical behavior began to deteriorate-distrust in Italy, one might be tempted to argue, increased because of the revelations of public corruption arising from the ongoing Tangentopoli investigations-it is striking that these indicators began to move more or less in tandem for a wide range of countries

over the past two decades. This suggests that a larger socioeconomic process has been at work, disrupting civil society in all of these countries, one that has nonetheless been avoided by Asia's culturally distinct societies.

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